



From the Office of Secretary of State John A. Gale

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The following op-ed was submitted by Secretary of State John Gale.

Central Asia has Strategic and Trade Importance

Recently, Nebraska was honored by a visit from Ambassador Javlon Vakhobov, Embassy of Uzbekistan, located in Washington, D.C. He was accompanied by his Deputy Chief of Mission Kadambay Sultanov, and their Nebraska hosts, Ahmed and Nilufar Salama of Omaha. Ambassador Vakhobov was recently appointed as the highest diplomatic official in the U.S. from Uzbekistan. In his new role, he chose Nebraska as his second state to visit. Just as Nebraska is the Heartland of the United States, Uzbekistan is the heart of Central Asia.

As secretary of state, I serve as the state's chief protocol officer, and meet regularly with many foreign guests and diplomats. My role is that of goodwill ambassador. I've had many foreign guests during my 18 years in office. They have come from at least 80 countries. Many are guests of the U.S. Department of State. Others, are guests of local organizations. A number are diplomats representing their countries, like Ambassador Vakhobov.

Ambassador Vakhobov also met with Lt. Governor Mike Foley to talk about trade and investment. The ambassador's goal is to open up new avenues of trade, investment, and tourism between his country and the U.S. His message was very convincing. But, what do we know about Uzbekistan?

Uzbekistan is in Central Asia, an area of seven countries, which together are two-thirds the size of China. Central Asia is neighbor to Russia, China, Iran, and India, a rapidly developing and highly strategic area. Pakistan and Afghanistan, with a total of over 200 million people, are in Central Asia. Russia, China, India and Pakistan are all nuclear armed countries. In Afghanistan, the U.S. has fought its longest war in history.

Once the region's master as the Soviet Union, Russia still deems Central Asia of high strategic importance for trade and government relations. China is a growing trade partner in the area, and wants to build an international highway that will pass through Samarqand, Uzbekistan -- a new "Silk Road" to tie Central Asian nations closer to China.

Uzbekistan is a country of 30 million people with a territory of 172,000 square miles, two-and-a-half times the size of Nebraska, and slightly larger than the state of Montana. It borders on five adjacent countries including Afghanistan. The president of Uzbekistan, elected in 2016, is considered a progressive leader with a strong vision for his country's future. Two of his goals include bringing good governance, rule of law and unity to Uzbekistan as well as facilitating the peace process in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan has strong agricultural productivity which provides over fifty percent of the gross domestic product for its country, similar in many ways to Nebraska's agriculture. Commercial beef and sheep are important to its economy.

Uzbekistan has been an increasingly important trade partner with the United States with some \$3 billion in recent trade agreements. Major U.S. corporations have made large investments in the country, such as General Motors. Automobiles are manufactured there for domestic markets as well as foreign export. Modern Boeing aircraft have been purchased to provide international flights from its capital, Tashkent, to other international airports. Trade with the U.S. is growing.

Uzbekistan is a country with high potential as an important U.S. partner in Central Asia to fight terrorism, increase mutual investments, and create opportunities for trade and tourism. We need to pay attention to Central Asia.

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